



ATF News

**Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
Nashville Field Division**

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EX- FIRE CHIEF FOUND GUILTY OF WEST TENNESSEE ARSON

Memphis, TN- Terrell L. Harris, United States Attorney for the Western District of Tennessee and James Cavanaugh, Special Agent in Charge of the Nashville Field Division of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) announced that on November 22, 2004, John Allen LATON, 49 was found guilty following a jury trial for the crime of arson.

LATON was indicted by a federal grand jury on September 18, 2001 for violating Title 18 of the United States Code, Section 844(i)- Maliciously destroying by fire or explosives, any building or vehicle or other real or personal property used in or affecting interstate or foreign commerce. LATON was charged with committing the March 3, 2000 fire at the Henning Fire Department causing in excess of \$150,000 in damage. The case was a joint investigation by the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, the Tennessee State Fire Marshal's Bomb and Arson Section, the Germantown Fire Department, the Dyersburg Fire Department and ATF.

LATON was the Chief of the Henning Fire Department as well as the Lauderdale County Fire Coordinator/Director at the time of the fire. LATON also works as a fire investigator for Engineering and Fire Investigations, a national company that provides fire investigative services for insurance companies and other private sector clients.

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The arson investigation began when ATF was contacted by LATON on March 4, 2000 about an "electrical" fire that "didn't require an ATF response" at the Hemming Fire Department. LATON also contacted the Tennessee State Fire Marshal's Bomb & Arson Section and had a similar conversation regarding the fire at the fire department. Following the conversation, the Tennessee State Fire Marshal's Office and ATF decided to send assistance to the Henning Fire Department to help in any way possible. The scene was also worked by Certified Fire Investigators from the Dyersburg Fire Department and the Germantown Fire Department.

The pivotal point of the fire investigation was reached after a determination was made by investigators that the fire was intentionally set in the fire chief's office by using an accelerant. Investigators ruled that the fire was not electrical or accidental in nature. A time-delay ignition system was later found as evidence in LATON's office, hidden under a couch. This ignition system utilized a bag of charcoal and gasoline as an accelerant. ATF Agents were able to trace the charcoal as being purchased by LATON the same day of the fire. Furthermore, a witness identified LATON being at the fire station two hours before the fire started.

A Federal search warrant was obtained for LATON's home, truck and person by ATF and was executed on March 13, 2000. Subsequent to the search, investigators recovered a receipt reflecting the purchase of a programmable timer and gasoline on the same day of the fire.

Special Agent in Charge James Cavanaugh of the ATF Nashville Field Division stated that the investigation was "Ultimately successful because of tireless effort and teamwork of the agencies involved that worked with ATF in this investigation. We rely on the support and communication with our State and local law enforcement and fire service professionals to serve our communities day in and day out to protect public safety. This arson involved a person in a position of public trust, which is very unfortunate. No community deserves to have an arsonist running its fire department. At ATF, we believe in firefighters and the fire service. Arsonists are not welcome in such a respected professional group."

LATON's trial was held in Memphis November 17-22, 2004. Assistant U.S. Attorney Jennifer Webber for the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Western District of Tennessee prosecuted the case. LATON's sentencing is scheduled to occur on March 1, 2005. LATON faces a sentence of 5-20 years in federal prison. There is no parole in the federal prison system.

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